

## CHAPTER 1

### *March 1889*

*Whenever the doorbell rings I feel ready to faint for fear it is someone coming to have an account paid.*

The pen had hovered for a moment above the letter while she considered.

*When Jim comes home at night – she continued in her neat cursive script – it is with fear and trembling that I look into his face to see whether anyone has been to the office about my bills.*

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In one of Liverpool's best suburban addresses, Florence Maybrick was lost in thought as she sat in a silk-covered chair before the wide bay window. The parlour was almost perfect: embossed wallpapers offset red plush drapes lined with pale blue satin; several small tables, including one with negro supports, displayed shiny ornaments. A thick Persian carpet deadened the tread of restless feet.

A letter recently addressed to her mother in Paris lay beside her. It contained little of the chatter of the old days – the reports of balls and dinners, of new dresses, of renewed acquaintances or

the children. Instead, despite her effort to alight on a defiantly insouciant tone, it charted a newer reality of arguments, accusations and continuing financial anxiety.

In a while she would call Bessie to take it to the post. For the present her tapering fingers remained idle in the lap from which one of her three cats had lately jumped, bored by her failure to show it affection.

Today, the twenty-six-year-old was wonderfully put together, her clothes painstakingly considered if a little over-fussed. Loose curls, dark blonde with a hint of auburn, were bundled up at the back of her head and fashionably frizzed across her full forehead. Slim at the waist, wrists and ankles, but with softly voluptuous bust and hips, she was all sensuousness, with large blue-violet eyes that made her irresistibly charming and aroused protective instincts in men. Yet a lack of angle in the line of her jaw conspired against Florence being a beauty, and a careful observer might even have noticed a peculiar detachment about her, for the young American was impressionable and egotistical, worldly but not wise.

Her glance lingered on the Viennese clock on the mantelpiece and slid across the cool lustre of the pair of Canton porcelain vases. Through the broad archway, early spring blossoms had been gathered into cut-glass vases and set on the Collard & Collard piano. Further down was the dining room with its Turkey carpet, leather-seated Chippendale chairs and sturdy oak dining table spacious enough for forty guests.

Each of these formal public rooms opened on to a broad hall where double doors led to steps and a gravel sweep that snaked out towards substantial gates set into walls draped with ivy. At the back of the hall a dark-wood staircase rose to a half-landing where a stained-glass window scattered coloured drops of light about the walls and floors. A narrower set of stone steps went down to the flagged kitchen, servants' dining room, scullery, pantry, china and coal stores and the washroom with its large copper tub.

The parlour fire smouldered. Occasionally a log resettled with a gentle plume of ash.

Outside, beyond lace-draped French windows, lawns reached down towards the river, covered by a layer of thick snow that muffled the memory of happier summers. A pair of peacocks high-stepped – screaming at the cartwheeling flakes – past shrubberies, flowerbeds and summerhouses, round a large pond and through the thickest drifts lumped over the long grass in the orchard. The chickens ruffled their feathers against the cold; in the kennels and stables the dogs and horses breathed white into the cold air. A fashionable three-seated phaeton was locked away in its shed, protected from the encroaching white.

Upstairs, on the first floor, was the Maybricks' substantial master bedroom with its adjoining dressing room containing a single bed. Next door to it was a large, square guest room and, further along the corridor, a night nursery for the two children – seven-year-old James (known as Sonny or Bobo) and Gladys, who would soon turn three. A linen cupboard was at one end of the landing and a lavatory and bathroom at the other, along with a separate 'housemaid's closet' with a large sink and shelves. On the second floor were lower-ceilinged rooms, a day nursery where the children took their lessons and three smaller bedrooms shared by the female staff – a cook, housemaid, parlour maid and the children's nurse.

Battlecrease House spoke of prosperity and stability, proclaiming Florence and her solid English husband – twenty-four years her senior – to be an ambitious couple attuned to the envy game. It was a private, family space but also an assertion of their conformity to conventional taste and morality, a stage for the formal dinners and whist suppers that oiled the wheels of society and business. As Henry James' Madame Merle noted, *one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.*

One half of a substantial, squarely built building divided into

two separate homes, Battlecrease had been James' choice. Next door lived the Steels: Maud and her solicitor husband Douglas. Over the road was the Liverpool Cricket Club, its spacious grounds ensuring that the plot was not overlooked – that it was private if not remote. Turn left from the driveway and narrow Riversdale Road soon joined broad Aigburth Road with its clusters of small shops: grocers, butchers and several chemists. Turn right instead, cross the bridge over a little railway line and the road ended with a fine view of the slate-grey Mersey, an expanse of river and sky raked by slanting light and bracing winds. On the far bank were the tree-studded hills of the Wirral.

Right on the border of the southern suburbs of Aigburth and Grassendale, the district was all fresh air, birdsong and a slow pace of life. Yet it took only half an hour to reach the heart of the robust city by train or carriage and servants and workers could easily grab a penny seat in the tram running down Aigburth Road.

Just five miles away, Liverpool – the principal city of Lancashire and known as 'the Port of Empire' – might have been another world. As the nation's second most important city, goods and passengers crowded the shipping basins, warehouses and factories that lined the six miles of its industrialised shore. Mercantile ambition and civic power had triumphed here: wrought-iron lamp-posts stood sentinel on the corners of the main streets and grand new classical structures graced the city centre, including St George's Hall (1838), the Walker Art Gallery (1874) and the County Sessions House (1884). For a swelling bourgeoisie clamouring for cultural pastimes there was a thriving Philharmonic Hall and Society, as well as an ever-growing number of theatres, concert and music halls, libraries and various other improvement societies.

Six hundred thousand souls called it home. A system of over two hundred horse-drawn trams ran on tracks down the centre of arterial roads and from its five railway termini lines radiated

to the north, south and east. Streets had been re-developed for shops that offered the latest Paris fashions and everything an aspiring couple could need in order to make their lives appear 'just so'. There was Lewis's – one of the earliest department stores – as well as auction houses and salerooms. There was a thriving city press and W. H. Smith's red carts dashed across the roads, piled high with the latest newspapers. Overwhelmingly, there was noise and action: the shriek of trains pitted against the rumble of coal wagons, the tramp of policemen's boots, the whirl of machinery, the clatter of horses: what the *Liverpool Review* described as the *roar of the great caravansary*.

Alongside the city's elegant late-Georgian districts Victorian terraces had multiplied and a string of urban parks, punctuated with developments of pretty detached villas, proclaimed the gentrification of the suburbs. By comparison, along the line of docks that described Liverpool's western margin the smell of seawater mingled with the tang of creosote, sweat and smoke. Past tall stone buildings and warehouses bursting with tobacco, cotton and spices, an assortment of vehicles swerved through dense traffic. Extending for miles, the tall masts of boats pricked at the sky – their rigging slapping fractiously in the wind – while above them lowered the broad funnels of the transatlantic steamers delivering immigrants to England or waiting for the flood tide to transport passengers to the New World.

By the late 1880s other English ports were beginning to compete, but about a third of all the country's business and almost all of her American trade still passed through Liverpool. As a result, alongside its middle-class entertainments, its concert halls and hospitals, the city was pitted with sugar refineries, iron and brass foundries, breweries, roperies, alkali and soap works, cable and anchor manufactories and tar and turpentine distilleries. Neighbouring collieries fuelled its industry. Canal and rail links with nearby Manchester boosted its wealth.

Liverpool's connection with America's Southern cotton growers

was so close that the city had supported the Southern states during the American Civil War, hoisting Confederate flags on its public buildings. Cotton was the king: around six million bales arrived each year from America's Atlantic and Gulf ports, accounting for almost half of Liverpool's imports, destined for the forty million spindles and half a million looms of the Lancashire cotton mills. Bundled in the heat of the cotton fields, it was unloaded in a city where, during the autumn and winter, river fog slicked the cobble streets and drizzle diffused the light from shop windows as pedestrians turned their shoulders to the squalls blown in from the sea.

The great industrial city was powerfully exciting, providing the opportunity to accumulate significant wealth and offering numberless chances for improvement. Yet its renaissance was rooted in the dirty profits of the slave trade and the place still had, for all its self-regard, its ambition and its pride, a rotten underbelly. Slums straggled back from the waterfront; ragged, malnourished and deformed children swarmed through shambolic rookeries and courts where forty families might be forced to share a single water tap and latrine, and where filth seeped into the walls. Regardless of the City Corporation's vigorous attempts at slum clearance and the fact that it was the first both to appoint a Medical Office of Health and to establish district nurses, the bustle of commerce masked a city of extremes. Under the surface of thrusting progress, beneath the skin of propriety and manners, vicious poverty, a violent gang culture and physical suffering persisted. *I had seen wealth. I had seen poverty*, Richard Armstrong would write in 1890, *but never before had I seen streets . . . with all that wealth can buy loaded with the haunts of hopeless penury . . . the gaunt faces of the poor, the sodden faces of the abandoned, the indifferent air of so many who might have been helpers and healers of woe.*

Battlecrease House and suburban Aigburth were financed by the profits of this industrial trade but they stood apart from its

poverty, providing protection from the distressing shadow of material want, the city's stench as much as its noise and speed. Attuned to the distant boom of the ships' blasts, to the ebb and flow of the mighty river that reflected and magnified the light, the only complaints here were from the mournful seagulls whose pulsing cries seemed unceasingly to stitch together the land, sea and sky.

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Sitting in the Battlecrease parlour that Saturday morning, 16 March 1889, Florence felt suffocated. It was too quiet. The nursemaid, Alice Yapp, had the children. James was in the city fussing over his deals. Mrs Humphreys, the cook, was preparing lunch. The young maids – Bessie Brierley and Mary Cadwaller – were tucking, polishing and tidying, putting to rights the nursery, straightening the upstairs rooms, quietly moving down corridors as they completed their chores.

Across the hall were a less formal family morning room and James' study, the three doors of which were always locked. Inside it were comfortably deep leather chairs and shelves containing reference books: his dictionaries and encyclopaedia, newspapers and business journals. On the walls hung engravings that poked fun at the institution of marriage. The room was an approximation of a gentleman's club, a place for James to entertain male friends and to keep wine, liquor, cigars, cards and poker chips. Redolent with the odour of tobacco, cluttered with various bottles of pills, potions and tonics, it was his sanctuary, tidied only when he gave the maids permission to go inside.

The study signalled loudly that James Maybrick's time, his space and his choices were precious, that in the pursuit of his very public, commercial role his decisions and appetites took precedence. Constrained by far narrower conventions, the job of his youthful wife was to contribute to the moral guardianship of the nation through the proper upbringing of their children and

the generally emollient influence of her virtuous femininity. She was expected to derive personal fulfilment from within the margins of her marriage, her children and the management of her domestic sphere. As Oscar Wilde's Lord Goring put it: *a man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses.*

Obsessively testing out the reflecting powers of her mirrors, indolently fond of second-rate love stories, Florence Maybrick's life was, by comparison with James' and even her staff's, stagnant. She may not have railed, even privately, against the social code that required her to suppress too much individuality but nor did she quite manage to involve herself in the practical concerns of the drawing room, nursery or kitchen. James set the agenda. He, mostly, saw to the hiring of new staff and gave orders around the house. He, born and raised in Lancashire, supplied their circle of friends.

While his life was centred on the external world, her efforts were concentrated on concealing her growing loneliness while burnishing the appearance of respectability. Looking the part – her silhouette exaggerated by tight skirts, protruding bustles, high-necked shirts, frills, feathers and furbelows – Florence managed effectively to ensure that their lives appeared unblemished. Yet something was not quite right. The glaze of the Maybricks' carefully constructed world was beginning to crackle. Submerged beneath the apparent harmony of her mildly Southern drawl and their prettily cohesive marriage lurked the deeper dangers of broken promises, curdling disappointment and growing discontent.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Expectations*

Anthony Trollope, a novelist who put the importance of marriage at the centre of so much of his work, wrote some time around 1873 that a man seeks a woman's hand *because she has waltzed stoutly with him, and talked pleasantly between the dances*. The risk, he suggested, was all on her side since he would *take her to his sphere of life, not bind himself to hers*. *She, knowing nothing, took a monstrous leap in the dark*, and everything changed.

Florence had taken a great leap.

She had been born in September 1862 in the prosperous Southern seaport of Mobile, Alabama. Carrie Holbrook, her adventurous, full-lipped mother, was from a socially elevated New York family and had snapped up William Chandler, a banker and one of the most eligible Southern-states bachelors, at the outset of the Civil War. Taking Mobile society by storm, she soon won a reputation for partying fast and late, ruffling so many feathers by her incursion that when Florence's father died she wasted little time in gathering up her two young children and leaving the sweeping bays of the Gulf of Mexico. Within a year Carrie had married Frank DuBarry, a dashing

Confederate officer whom she may have originally met in Mobile several years earlier. The match led to conjecture and gossip, and when DuBarry soon died of battle wounds while on board a blockade-runner the fact that his widow insisted he be buried at sea rather than returned to land raised eyebrows all over again.

Carrie Holbrook Chandler spent the following years traveling between New York and the European cities of Paris, Cologne and St Petersburg. Her son Holbrook and daughter Florence received interrupted, patchy educations, and were perhaps unaware that their mother existed on the very margins of scandal. By 1880 Carrie was middle-aged, loud, large, ebullient and, once again, single, having been abandoned by her third husband, a handsome but profligate Prussian army officer called Baron von Roques. Florence was just seventeen when, that spring, she and her mother boarded the SS *Baltic* in New York and set out for Liverpool.

James Maybrick was also on board. Still a bachelor at forty-one, somewhere above medium height, with slightly grizzled sandy hair and heavy-lidded grey eyes, he had a fine-boned face – almost hawkish at some angles – and wore drooping moustaches over an emphatically firm mouth. His coats were admirably fitted and, according to his contemporaries, he was educated, interesting, stiff-backed, generally popular and as tenacious as a bulldog. Some said he was fond of wine, women and horses, and though he was only a handful of years younger than the Baroness he pursued her daughter throughout the ten-day voyage – making Florence laugh, paying her constant attention and effectively concealing his tendency to pessimism, his quick temper and his obsessions about his health.

Their ship had been built in the early 1870s and was already old-fashioned, yet its first-class cabins were comfortable and its dinner menus ran to multiple courses. Days aboard an ocean steamer were particularly conducive to the growth of sudden

friendships and theirs were filled with a series of social events that included dances, concerts, masques and cards – providing, as everyone understood, endless opportunities for partying and flirtation. James played the courtship game with confidence: sixteen months later he and Florence were married at Christopher Wren’s St James’s Church, Piccadilly. It is unlikely that either she or her mother knew that the Maybrick coat of arms, bearing the motto *Time Reveals All*, had been hurriedly ordered from the College of Arms just weeks before the ceremony.

It is possible too that the fast-talking Baroness exaggerated the truth about Florence’s fortune. Substantial where her daughter was delicate, forthright and worldly where the girl was tentative and quiet, von Roques was financially straitened. Later, some would wonder whether Florence set out deliberately to ensnare James, asking whether the Southern belle’s feelings had been genuine. Had she been flattered by the attentions of a handsome, apparently rich older Englishman who professed to offer her a position within the Liverpool elite? Did she marry to gain independence of her mother? Was she coaxed, bribed or simply naïve, an unwitting hostage in a dance of mutual deception choreographed by her mother and a man old enough to be her father?

Apparently incompatible by age and upbringing, the union of the Mobile ingénue and the stiff English cotton broker was, at any rate, fashionable. Seven years earlier the impulsive love match between Jennie Jerome of Brooklyn, New York, and Lord Randolph Churchill, third son of the Duke of Marlborough, had unleashed a flood of matches between American girls fixed on the romantic image of the old-world and rather dour Englishmen in need of new-world cash. Well-off American mothers with pretty daughters of marriageable age were beginning to flock to Europe, lured by the example of the engagements announced in the society columns of the papers.

James, having lived for a while in Virginia, was used to American girls but the majority of his family and neighbours

were not and his new wife was conspicuous not only by her youth and accent but by so many small differences. He had been born and raised in Liverpool, one of five sons of a respectable engraver-turned-parish clerk who were all privately educated at a local boarding school to take advantage of the county's industrial flourishing. The eldest, William, was by 1880 a shipping clerk in Manchester and the fourth son, Thomas, was the manager of a packing business. James was the second-born, particularly close to Michael – two years his junior – and Edwin, the baby of the family born thirteen years after James. These three bachelors formed a mutually reliant triangle.

When James and Florence married, Michael was forty, six foot tall, powerfully built, blond and distinguished. Known to his family as 'Blucher', he was considered the cleverest, was organist to the Grand Lodge of Freemasons and had started to make his fortune as a successful baritone singer and composer of popular songs. Fame had begun to make him inscrutable and a little arrogant so that some old family friends privately carped that Michael had already booked himself a tomb in Westminster Abbey. Put simply, having moved south to London he had outgrown the city of his birth. Whether or not he considered his new sister-in-law to be an adventuress, he made it clear that he had little time for the frivolous, apparently inconsequential young bride of his much-loved sibling.

From the start, Florence found Michael uncomfortably cold and domineering, but James' youngest sibling, Edwin, made up for it by being charming. In his early thirties, equally tall, with wavy black hair, pale skin and deep brown eyes, Edwin enjoyed a reputation as the best looking of the Maybrick brothers. He was junior partner in James' Liverpool cotton business and he was good company – so much so that when he was not in America he accompanied Florence to the parties and dances they both loved. Indeed, perhaps because Edwin was closer in age to Florence than James and because the two were so often seen

together, knowing looks were exchanged in the conservative parlours of the city's suburbs though James seemed broadly unconcerned. It may even have suited him that his young brother kept his wife happy by paying her attention. Only once, at a formal dinner, did he appear rattled by their friendship: hearing Florence wonder aloud how different her life would have been had it been Edwin instead of James on the SS *Baltic* he had reddened, clenched his fist and dropped his knife. It took only seconds, one guest noted, for him to suppress his sudden rage, recover himself and project once more the impression of smooth equanimity.

Beyond her new husband's immediate family, Florence's social circle was made up of those with whom James did business or had grown up and chief among these last were the Janions. Mrs Janion – Domilita – was an elderly Chilean whom James and Florence would soon ask to stand as their first child's godmother and her three daughters were regular visitors to Battlecrease. The eldest, Matilda Briggs, was separated from her husband and now lived with her own two daughters at her brother Richard's house on the edge of Sefton Park. Nearer James' age than Florence's, Matilda could be overbearing, advising him on what coats to wear, suggesting what might be most appropriate for dinner, failing to appreciate that her intrusive confidence made Florence feel inconsequential and sidelined. It could not have helped that Matilda was also said to have once been in love with James, nor that she and her younger sister Constance – Mrs Hughes – were thick as thieves and more or less intimidating. Only the youngest Janion girl, Gertrude, was unmarried and fun; the same age as Florence, she did at first become a friend.

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Almost exactly forty weeks after their wedding the Maybricks' son was born. The pair were lodging with Richard Janion and Matilda

Briggs and it was not always easy, perhaps, for Florence to feel herself being judged by Matilda, for whom marriage and motherhood were neither new nor joyful. It may therefore have been with some relief that when the baby was about three months old Florence began to organise the packing of steamer trunks in anticipation of returning to America. In Norfolk, Virginia – a town of fifty thousand building its post-Civil War recovery largely on the strength of its cotton trade – she and James would properly establish their first marital home in a country and among people she understood.

Two years later, in the late spring of 1884, believing his business to be on more solid ground and hankering again for Liverpool, James moved them back, leasing from Matilda Briggs a pretty stucco villa called Beechville in the prosperous suburb of Grassendale. Renting was not unusual: in fact, for most middle-class Victorians, house ownership was less important than occupying the sort of property that signalled status, so that only around 10 per cent actually bought their homes – the rest signing three- to seven-year agreements that allowed them to trade up or down as their circumstances changed.

At Beechville, Florence and James put down English roots. In the summer of 1886 a daughter – Gladys – was born and, for a while, things seemed comfortable and settled. The Maybrick phaeton was pulled by a pair of satiny black horses sporting brass-buckled harnesses, managed by a groom immaculate in his uniform. Each Sunday James and Florence rode out together into the countryside, to all appearances unified, polished and carefree. Florence laughed, teased and sang on a whim; she was nicknamed ‘Birdie’ by acquaintances and ‘Bunny’ by her fond husband. They entertained and accepted hospitality, smiling and gracious, a couple radiating reliability.

By the time Gladys was beginning to form her first words, though, both were struggling with the effort of concealing their escalating difficulties. For a start, James had discovered soon after

their marriage that his mother-in-law was in need of a financial prop. Pursued for debts she had run up with her estranged husband, the Baroness repeatedly asked him for small loans which she then failed to repay. After six years he was exasperated by her lies but continued to hope that Florence would profit from income generated from some land she had inherited in America. Then, his patience thinning, he began to demand that the Baroness repay money taken without authorisation from his wife's inheritance trust. By 1887 relations were so sour that James made almost no effort to conceal his bitterness that Florence's promised fortune had turned out to be little more than a meagre annuity.

He was enraged by stories that the Baroness had broken her word countless times and that she was said to have destroyed the faith even of her closest friends. He was equally antipathetic towards Florence's brother Holbrook, furiously accusing him during one particularly difficult period of having hidden the fact of their limited means while he was courting Florence – insinuating that he had been swindled. Forbidding Florence from talking to her brother or mother about their private affairs, James for a while refused to allow her to receive their letters and permitted her to write to them only at his dictation. To him, everything about his wife's unconventional little family had become unpleasantly different, from their conversation to their manners and – it seemed – their probity. He wanted to keep them at arm's length. For his part, Holbrook came to the conclusion that his brother-in-law had turned out, dismayingly, to be both *a bully and a brute*.

These resentments added to Florence's isolation and, compounding it all, a general economic slowdown was adversely affecting James' business, putting them both under pressure. In October 1887 Florence wrote to her mother that their assets were reduced to fifteen hundred pounds, with just five hundred safely in the bank. Edwin was in America, charged with investing a thousand pounds in Galveston cotton in the hope of trading it at a profit. Fearing the venture would fail, Florence

confessed that James' business had made only £125 in the previous five years. She believed they were close to ruin. As their capital dwindled she had, she wrote, tried to persuade James to rent a cheaper house but, on the contrary, he had his eye on the lease for Battlecrease. *I am utterly worn out, she complained, and in such a state of overstrained nervousness that I am hardly fit for anything.*

Florence particularly loathed the fact that James had borrowed money from Matilda Briggs, yet her disinclination to rein in her own spending only made things worse. To each side of her husband's exclusive Liverpool club, the Palatine in upmarket Bold Street, were shops that offered the kind of expensive fashions and jewellery she found endlessly appealing. Her wardrobe rustled and shone with surah silk jackets, evening dresses designed to emphasise her spider-waist, light grey silks trimmed in dark purple velvet or Brussels lace. Side by side with her precious letters and the bits of remaining jewellery that were carefully stored in the drawers of her dressing chest were fans, cosmetics and scents, pin-tucked blouses in the latest styles and kid gloves and silk stockings rolled in tissue paper. Stacked high in boxes in the corner of the dressing room were fine Milan straw hats with curling feathers, felted wool toques and small-brimmed bonnets with ruched ribbons and fine veils.

Obsessed by presenting a faultless appearance, Florence was as vain, impatient and tiresomely self-absorbed as a spoiled child. She ran up bills at photographic studios, confectioners, stationers and purveyors of furnishings and china, but shopping was not her only failing. Matching James' love of the track, she had also made a number of disastrous wagers. Horse racing was all about the flash of money – sleek animals, trophies, prize funds and grandstand prices – and technology had changed the nature of race-day gambling. Betting shops and racing newspapers all relied on the telegraph for stable gossip, starting prices and results, and anyone with access to a post office wire service could



place a bet without even being present at the course. Thus Florence had accumulated substantial secret debts.

Hiding the extent of these liabilities even from her beloved, if unreliable, mother, Florence was clearer sighted about their household expenses and regularly tried to convince James to make changes so that they could live more economically. He disagreed. *He says it would ruin him outright*, she wrote to the Baroness, *for one must keep up appearances until he has more capital to fall back on . . . The least suspicion aroused, all claims would pour in at once and how could Jim settle with what he has now?* In other words, if the Liverpool cotton network caught wind of Maybrick's business difficulties, he would be sunk. Broking – taking a gamble on the price of commodities – involved a series of deals underpinned by gentlemen's promises: the merest whisper of financial insecurity could puncture the precious bubble of mutual faith on which businesses like his survived and, since success depended on credit-worthiness, reputations were fiercely guarded. James understood that a projection of domestic affluence underpinned vital assumptions about his professional reliability.

Thus, three years after returning to Liverpool, things were so tight that he allowed Florence just seven pounds a week for housekeeping – around half the amount recommended by one contemporary household manual for the running of a more modest home than their own, occupied by a couple with just one child and three servants. The insufficiency fed a growing discontent on both sides. If James had married for money he had been mistaken and if he had painted a rosier picture of his financial status she, too, had been deluded. Together they were trapped in the late-Victorian cult of money articulated by Oscar Wilde's Sir Robert Chilton: *what this century worships is wealth. The God of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs, one must have wealth.*

The two-decade age gap between Florence and James began to

seem unbridgeable as 1887 threw up continuous challenges. In April Holbrook died in Paris of tuberculosis. Then James and Florence's little boy caught scarlet fever as it raged through the city: the rest of the family decamped to Wales, leaving Florence alone to nurse the boy through six gruelling weeks while the cook set down meals beyond a curtain hung outside the nursery door. Finally, towards December 1887, Florence discovered that James had been maintaining a long-term mistress. She never said how she knew – perhaps she came across accounts or bills that gave the game away – but the sure knowledge of her husband's calculated, long-term infidelity dealt a final, shattering blow to her girlishly romantic dreams.

## CHAPTER 3

### *One Man's Poison*

Painfully aware of the growing distance between them, Florence and James each worried about the future. Endlessly fussing over his health and fearing that his family would be penniless in the event of his death, James arranged two life insurance policies: five hundred pounds with the Scottish Widows Fund and two thousand with the Mutual Reserve Fund Life Association of New York. In both cases he assigned his wife as the beneficiary. Then in early 1888, despite Florence's growing concerns about their rising debts, he moved them all into Battlecrease House.

In her extensive new home, in the seventh year of her marriage, Florence felt grand but unmoored. She breakfasted in bed, strolled indolently about the garden, rearranged her wardrobes, petted the children and read American romances with Old-South plots whose evocations of dust, heat and scandals were the absolute antithesis of her cold, very proper English world. When she was sick of rattling around in the big house she changed and took the carriage into Liverpool, sometimes returning with James. By now the couple rarely strolled together in the garden and when they did it was never arm in arm. She no longer fondly

counted his grey hairs and he no longer bothered to tease her, as he used to do, about non-existent holes in her stockings.

At formal dinners and dances, dressed in low-necked, short-sleeved gowns, Florence was as poised as a statue, openly admired. Small diamonds clasped tightly around her throat sparkled as she waited in the hall to receive their guests and their pretty compliments while James blustered about the price of cotton and asked after wayward sons. Both relied on the appearance of calm, on the proficiency of their cook and the assistance of the maids, who stood smartly to one side. Buttoned into their Sunday best, the children were brought downstairs by the ramrod-straight nursemaid and were briefly shown off before being whisked smartly back upstairs.

Social obligations designed to cement bonds with the city's mercantile elite meant that Florence and James rarely spent more than two evenings a week at home alone. Florence had developed an easy familiarity with many of James' colleagues. She flirted, leaning – sometimes – just a little too close, patting them on their heads, putting her fingers under one's chin, resting her hand on another's knee. Occasionally she laughed just a bit too loud. The effort of it all could be exhausting and Florence was beginning to realise that she might make plenty of acquaintances in her adopted land but no really intimate, lasting friends.

And so she played her wifely role, alive to the social part assigned to her, while remaining a foreign element, a cuckoo in the Liverpool nest. In this she was not alone, for the truth behind many of the fashionable Anglo-American alliances of the time was that even New World heiresses were rarely wholeheartedly accepted by the conservative societies into which they married. Consuelo Vanderbilt was said to have wept throughout her marriage to Viscount Mandeville, the Duke of Manchester's heir, in 1895 and the Duke was contemptuous of the *little American savage entering his family*. Endlessly portrayed as lively, talkative and vibrantly energetic on the one hand, vulgar and lacking in

morals on the other, American girls often found the myriad rigid social conventions of England – beyond the allure of its fine buildings and landscapes – simply stifling.

English men and women took for granted things that shocked or made new American wives miserable, or were horrified by things the Americans did quite innocently. Some found New York women particularly forward, lacking in the female duties of grace, fragrance and passivity, and British in-laws certainly often considered American girls too exaggerated for their tastes. Unpractised in the pretences and compliances of her Liverpool milieu Florence was, to some, a blast of fresh air. To others, her difference rankled.

She may not even have been aware that within visiting distance were at least two other young American women also suffering in the social chill of the seaport city. Florence Schiefelin had recently married Bruce Ismay the shipping magnate, who would one day build the *Titanic*, but she already understood that *she had sacrificed her life for a drab Liverpool suburb with a man she no longer recognised*. Ismay immersed himself in work and she felt alone and homesick, an outsider constrained to conceal her wretchedness at the tedium of her life, making up for it by purchasing everything that was most up to date. Ismay's business manager Harold Sanderson had also married an American girl, Maud Blood. Poor Maud also found it hard to fit in.

James' business associates were friendly but his brother Michael, on his rare visits north, could be frostily impolite and James had turned out to be faithless and morose. Florence felt lonely and fragile; she felt let down. Love had not, as it did in her trashy novels, revolutionised her life or lasted, rapturously unchanged. The snobberies, rivalries and relative torpor of her Liverpool life had begun to feel insufferable; marriage had turned out to be a disappointment, made up of a succession of cloying, empty days.

Like so many contemporary literary heroines, Florence was

waiting for something to happen, something to lift her from the solitude and dreariness of her life, to erase its ennui and halt her deepening unhappiness. Restless, she found it almost impossible to concentrate on their daily lives.

Even in the good times it had become obvious that almost nothing about the management of her home came naturally to her, despite the advice of ladies' domestic magazines or the frequent, uninvited counsel of Matilda Briggs. Household manuals aimed at bourgeois wives regularly warned against slatternly cooks, made suggestions about how to counter a housemaid's impudence and cautioned mistresses to be on the alert for rebellions in the form of sulks, answering back or turning a deaf ear to bells. But the effects of industrialisation, by making alternatives to domestic work more easily available, meant that it could be as hard to persuade staff to remain as it was to find them in the first place and Florence had discovered at first hand that old-fashioned deference could no longer be taken for granted.

Mixing familiarity with apparent civility, able to leave without notice, cooks, maids and nursemaids had more power than ever before and they knew it. At Battlecrease the upstairs and downstairs maids were forever changing; Florence could hardly keep up. Currently, Bessie Brierley and Mary Cadwallader – a Shropshire girl nicknamed 'Gentle Mary' – were both even-tempered and good-hearted but Florence rarely issued an instruction. The fact that she was neither competent nor engaged enough efficiently to organise their daily chores meant that the two girls sometimes idled about their work or lingered in the kitchen catching up on gossip with the cook.

There, at least, Florence was comfortable. Mrs Elizabeth Humphreys had supervised the kitchen for the Maybricks when they lived at Beechville and in October 1888 James managed to persuade her to return after a short break. Her presence made Florence a little more relaxed. Unlike the girls who scuttled around corners or who broke off conversations as she approached, Mrs

Humphreys never felt like a threat. She fussed over James with herbal teas and with the stewed fruit and baked apples that he believed to be good for his liver and she happily prepared the plainer dishes he demanded whenever he believed that his health was in decline. Rather than countering every suggestion with an alternative – like Matilda or her sister Constance – Mrs Humphreys agreed with her mistress that soles and chickens were better for James' indigestion than joints, cheese and sardines. She was a constant and gentle soul, calm and patient but also competent enough to provide for the flashy dinner parties that Florence seemed, increasingly, to enjoy. In short, Humphreys was both friendly and reliable, and she got on with her work without the need for direction.

Florence's greatest difficulty was with the children's nursemaid hired a year or so earlier, when Gladys was just a few months old.

James had taken on Alice Yapp, a young woman from a large Shropshire family who had worked in a previous household alongside Mary Cadwallader, but who had none of that maid's easy familiarity. Instead, with her largish nose, downward-sloping eyebrows and prepossessing air Yapp neither looked jovial nor exuded warmth. Although almost exactly the same age as Florence, more than a decade of looking after the children of wealthy suburban families had given her a slightly pinched air and Florence had reprimanded her several times for being decidedly too stern.

Insisting on being called Nurse Yapp, the young woman in charge of the children was stricter than anyone Florence had encountered during her own upbringing. Once ready for bed, they were not allowed to romp or play. Always neat and clean, they were drilled in their table manners and the little boy was slapped sharply if he tilted his bowl to get at the last bits of his breakfast porridge. It was the kind of efficiency and capability that ranked high in James' estimation, but Florence worried, especially about Gladys, who seemed to be receiving too little warmth and who was often left to cry alone in her room.

Unconvinced that Alice Yapp would ever care deeply for her children, Florence had tried to encourage warmth in the girl without much luck, and she felt uncomfortable. She had the impression that Yapp poked about the house when she was out; she felt watched and judged; and she was acutely conscious that the nursemaid hardly bothered to mask a latent antipathy towards her. Florence found it hard to know how to counter Yapp's hostility – she was always hurrying the children in and out of rooms, off to walks, into meals or marching them up the stairs to bed. She seemed to Florence rarely to smile, to be both impudent and resentful. More, Yapp's resilient disregard deepened Florence's growing sense of her own uselessness.

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On the morning of 31 December 1888, as rain coursed into the gutters and the clouds sank so low that the sky muffled Battlecrease House, a violent argument erupted – almost certainly about money – which ended with James stamping his foot and tearing up the will in which he had made his wife his sole legatee and trustee for the children. Dramatically tossing the papers aside, he taunted Florence that he intended to settle the bulk of his fortune on the children, allowing her only the third she was due under the law. He had gained less financially from their marriage than he had hoped; he would not allow her to profit in the event of his death.

Florence watched the scraps of paper flutter to the carpet, one or two drifting under the card table, others bursting into flame as they spun into the fire. She did not stoop to gather them up, determined to wait for James' temper to burn itself out rather than react. She felt the ground to be shifting uncertainly but was resolved not to fall. Later, trembling at her desk, she communicated it all in a letter to her mother. Feigning unconcern she scribbled that *I am sure it matters little to me as long as the children are provided for ... my own income will do for me alone.*



It was bluster. Perfectly aware that her mother would not be able financially to support her, Florence must also have appreciated that £125 a year drawn on her grandmother's heavily mortgaged property in New York would be, under any circumstances, an insufficient safety net. However much she pretended or tried to reassure, it was apparent that her marriage had settled into something unexpected and uncomfortable. Frustrations, suppressed, had become lodged into the corners of their lives. Sometimes she gasped with the ache of it. The effort of concealing the fact that their marriage was disintegrating was beginning to wear her out.

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On dull days the river and the sky joined to form an apparently impenetrable grey veil while the smell of the sea was a constant reminder of risk, profit and loss, emphasising the reality that her native country was drearily distant. James was increasingly bilious and self-centred. Fine dresses alone were no longer enough to hold his attention and, along with their financial difficulties, his general pessimism cast a pall. Taking it in turns with Edwin to make regular cotton-buying trips to America, he left Florence to stew in the suburbs.

Contributing to the strain of it all, she had noticed and was worried by peculiar habits that seemed to be undermining James' health and contributing to the shortness of his temper. Naturally prone to gloom about his business prospects and to general hypochondria, he had for years been an inveterate self-medicator. If conversation turned on an illness or a new disease he worried about contracting it. If he heard of a new, efficacious medication he hastened to try it out. Bottles and vials, boxes and packets cluttered Battlecrease's rooms; the drawers and shelves in his study and dressing room were littered with pills and liquids. Price's glycerine bottles, bismuth, mixtures of brandy and physic, boxes of crystals, gargles, borax and soda mint tablets cluttered the surfaces. In his desk was a case containing a syringe as well

as a bottle of belladonna and packets of potash and phosphori pills. Dispensed by chemists in Liverpool and Virginia, many of the bottles were empty but for sticky brown sediments. Several were labelled 'Not to be Taken'.

Exercised continually by real and fancied ills, a serial complainer of aches or of vaguer symptoms that came and went, dyspeptic, James was – according to most who knew him – endlessly asking the chemist to prepare him tonics. The family physician, Dr Richard Hopper, from his grand consulting rooms in Liverpool's Rodney Street, had variously diagnosed a derangement of the liver, an irritable digestive system and nervous disorders that acted negatively on Maybrick's gut. Forty-six years old, Irish-born Hopper was serious and cautious, a compact figure with sharp features and short black hair just beginning to grey. During one consultation James had showed him a bundle of prescriptions from New York – all aphrodisiacal tonics in which strychnine was the chief ingredient – admitting that he used arsenic as an 'anti-periodic' or general prophylactic against disease.

In response, the doctor warned James against taking poisons, yet he knew that many of these toxins were used widely both in prescription and over-the-counter medicines. In particular, pick-me-ups known as nerve tonics had become increasingly popular during the nineteenth century, touted as effective in fortifying the nerves against malaise or undefined illness, and Dr Hopper prescribed them just as readily as the rest of his profession. Indeed, he was typical in finding no contradiction between his advice to James and his advocacy of solutions known to include strychnine or arsenical solutions like nux vomica.

When Florence came to express her concerns about her husband to Richard Hopper during the summer of 1888 he already knew about James' predilections. What Florence wanted to know, though, was whether it was possible to discover exactly what her husband was taking. Frantic about his vacillating health, she told the doctor that she believed that *he takes some poison or strong*

*medicine that he is very reticent about, and I am sure it will do him harm as he is always worse after it.* As a result, when Hopper was next at Battlecrease he made a point of taking a quick look in the dressing room that opened off the master bedroom. Casting his eye over the many potions and pills, he did notice some dangerous phosphoric acid but either he forgot or he decided not to question James further about it. He may simply have concluded that his patient was self-dosing against the general effects of advancing age or to enhance his sexual performance away from home; certainly the doctor seems to have overlooked the fact that James' habit might be causing or contributing to his neurotic irritability. When, later, he did raise the subject with his patient, Maybrick was not pleased. Taking his medical business elsewhere, he effectively sidestepped both the physician and his wife.

Florence was not alone in noticing James' appetites. Among his friends, he alternately boasted about taking poison and denied it, becoming adept at changing the subject whenever he felt uncomfortably challenged. If Edwin, as his business partner, wondered whether the addiction contributed to their shaky financial position he chose to do nothing.

By the spring of 1889 Florence had become desperate. James complained constantly of headaches and of numbness in his hands and feet. It was difficult to separate reality from hypochondria. When, in early March, the twenty-eight-year-old doctor from nearby Garston – Dr Richard Humphreys – came to Battlecrease in order to treat the children for whooping cough, she broached the subject again. Interrupted nights had stretched her to the limit. Desperate for support, she confided in the young doctor, telling him about James' strange powders and her deepening fears that he was killing himself.

Once more it was futile. Failing to recognise the depth of her concern, Dr Humphreys brushed Florence's anxieties aside. If James should suddenly and inexplicably die, he joked, *You can always say that we spoke about it.*